

From rent p Gladys Palr

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By Doris G. Worsham
The Tribune

During her 64-year career as a pianist, Gladys Palmer has shared stages with the greats of jazz, from Billie Holiday and Duke Ellington to Count Basie and Earl 'Fatha' Hines. But Palmer started out playing for rent parties in Atlanta during Prohibition.

"They'd sell soul food, fish and chips and corn whiskey and we'd go from 8 p.m. to 1 a.m. and sometimes later," Palmer recalled. "They'd request tunes such as 'Gimme a Pigfoot and a Bottle of Beer' and many of the old numbers, but they sure liked the blues."

On Saturday, Palmer will appear at an '80s version of a rent party at the "1985 Non-Conformal Ball," which will be held from 9 p.m. to 3 a.m. at the newly renovated Berkeley Conference Center, 2105 Bancroft Ave. at Shattuck Avenue.

The event will benefit the financially beleaguered Berkeley Symphony Orchestra, which was forced to cancel the second half of its 1984-85 season.

The ball is sponsored by Berkeley Monthly magazine and non-conformism is its theme. Party-goers will be encouraged to wear "freestyle formal evening wear," and prizes totaling \$1,000 will be awarded for the most original costumes.

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Palmer and the McNeal Royal Garden Band will provide continuous entertainment on the center's smaller stage, which will be transformed into a "New Orleans/Jazz Bistro."

Headlining on the main stage will be Big City, a group specializing in world-beat music, and singer Maxine Howard. The Celestial Strings, a string quartet, also will perform.

Food for the benefit will be catered by Curds and Whey, Gertie's Chesapeake Bay Cafe, and several Eastbay restaurants.

The ball is only one of several monthly gigs for the tireless Palmer. At 79, she still performs weekly, playing solo piano from 4 to 8 p.m. Sundays at Gallagher's Bar & Restaurant in Jack London Square.

During a recent interview in her memorabilia-filled Berkeley apartment at the Harriet Tubman Terrace, Palmer zipped off several piano solos, including a swinging, boogie-influenced version of "Mack the Knife" and a gentle, thoughtful interpretation of the Erroll Garner classic, "Misty."

"I don't play like anybody else and nobody sounds like me," Palmer said with a smile. "I play what I feel but I love torch songs. People say I sound like Erroll Garner, but that's not possible because I was always older. I don't imitate anyone."

A native of Kingston, Jamaica, Palmer moved to the United States with her family at the age of 13. Her musical talent, she said, is God-given. Her father was a virtuoso violinist in his native Haiti, and her Trinidad-born mother was an accomplished pi-

Party to jazz club piano, her is still having a ball

anist.

Palmer said that she performed at rent parties for several years to raise tuition money to attend school, but she moved to Chicago in the early 1930s to work intermissions at the Three Deuces nightclub, where the headliners included Willie "the Lion" Smith and Fats Waller.

A succession of gigs followed in the mid-1930s at such leading New York clubs as the Famous Door, which featured Count Basie and his orchestra, and the Furnace, where Jimmy Lunceford and his big band frequently headlined. She also appeared on Rudy Vallee's radio show.

In 1937, Palmer played on numerous recordings with Roy Eldridge, including the hit, "After You're Gone," and in 1947, she recorded her biggest hit, "Fool That I Am," which she co-authored with Floyd Hunt.

During the mid-1940s, Palmer

worked as an accompanist for Billie Holiday at the Florentine Gardens in Los Angeles.

"I played for her for two years but she didn't like musicians — but she liked me," Palmer remembered. "She was a sweet person but I'm just sorry she got hooked on that stuff (heroin). We got along really well and she just loved my cooking. When I had a chance, I would cook her beans, greens and vegetables — she loved my vegetables."

In 1967, Palmer was offered a long-term contract as the featured pianist at the Siam Intercontinental Hotel in Bangkok, which was owned by the King of Thailand. She performed there until she returned to the United States in 1971 to care for her ailing mother.

"The king was a musician at heart," said Palmer. "He played clarinet and he'd often come into the hotel and jam with me. He



By Gary Reyes/The Tribune

Jazz pianist Gladys Palmer will be among the performers at Saturday's Berkeley Symphony benefit.

really loved 'I Left My Heart in San Francisco.'"

The still-youthful Palmer keeps active these days. In addition to her Gallagher's engagement, she plays piano at Bay Area convalescent hospitals and retirement homes and private parties, accompanied by a group

called the Whippersnappers, with whom she has played for the past seven years.

Palmer offered a simple explanation on her longevity as a musician.

"I know how to relax and I get plenty of rest," she explained. "I've been a drawing card all my

life because I've always looked respectable on the job ... I've had a beautiful life."

The Non-Conformal Ball will be held Saturday, 9 p.m. to 3 a.m., at the Berkeley Conference Center, 2105 Shattuck Ave. Tickets, available at BASS, are \$25 in advance, \$35 at the door. Information: 465-8663.